

# A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF MENSTRUAL PRACTICES ACROSS CULTURES

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## Abstract

*Studies on menstrual practices since last few decades concludes the views on menstruation as stigma and silence, embarrassment and fear with humiliation. The type of sanitation used for menstruation and its consequences are also highlighted in such studies. The practices surrounding menstruation in contemporary and historical perspective are reviewed and the notions are limited to taboos, myths, misinformation, and hygiene. The narrative related to menstruation and its practices since couple of years have altered and it is suggested that menstrual disorders which are on rise have nothing to do with menstrual hygiene. There is a large gap between cultural knowledge and practices regarding menstruation and discourse is created by academia, media and cinema. Detailed examination of practices prevalent in cultural traditions is required with contemporary analysis and decoding with scientific relevance. The need of seclusion, limiting certain food and activities with religious restrictions during menstruation are studied and role of oxidative stress, free radicals, pheromones, menstrual toxins, science of six chakras are some scientific evidences perceived through individual experiences. This approach adds evidence in validating the ancient science of menstrual practices and supports in maintaining reproductive health.*

**Keywords:** Menstrual practices, taboos, restrictions, traditions

## INTRODUCTION

The changing demands of the society towards women with multiple tasking have made them vulnerable for many diseases amongst which reproductive disorders are foremost. The modern lifestyle also renders them little time to focus on menstruation which is a monthly need and necessity. Menstruation is a biological process and a woman undergoes about 300 menstrual cycles from menarche to menopause and menstruates for about average 2000 days. During these days she has to combat whether to actively or passively follow the restrictions laid down by traditions / culture / religion and also towards the physical and emotional discomforts related with menstruation.

## AIM

To evaluate the studies on menstrual practices in contemporary research and historical perspective with socio-cultural aspects across globe.

## OBJECTIVES

1. To review and analyze the contemporary research studies on knowledge, attitude and practices related to menstruation.
2. To review the historical and socio-cultural practices of menstruation
3. To understand the science behind menstrual practices

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

1. The study highlights the socio-cultural beliefs associated with menstruation across the globe.
2. This study provides information historical perspective about menstruation.
3. This study highlights the contemporary research on menstrual practices.
4. The study will help to decode the menstrual practices.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Simple pooling of data from done from scientific platforms like academia, pubmed, research gate and books on menstrual practices. Books and research papers were identified on the topic and relevant information is presented with systematic review.

Following are the historical notions about menstruation across cultures

**Table 1 : Historical aspects of menstruation**

Hindu View on origin of Menstruation and practices	<p>Yajurveda taittiriya Samhita and repeated in Shatapata brahmana.</p> <p>The menstruation is third part of guilt of Indra( who cut heads of Vishvarupa; a brahmana) taken by women with a boon to obtain offspring and enjoy intercourse at will upto birth. Thusas she is emitting colour of guilt (menstruation) one should not converse with her, sit with her or eat food from her.</p> <p>In other Hindu scriptures, AngirasaSmrithi advises women against performing religious activities during menstruation. Yajurveda Taitariya Samhita again advices women not to cook during menstruation and remain abstain from sexual activity and if conception occur during menstruation, the offspring may have deformity or suffer from intra uterine death.</p> <p>In <i>Manusmriti</i>, another Hindu ancient literature states that "The wisdom, the energy, the strength, the might, and the vitality of a man who approaches a woman who has menstrual excretions, utterly perish.</p> <p><i>Parashar Smriti</i>; the hindu code of law states that 'The women, old or young are never polluted in any way and if polluted can attain purity through menstruation'. The code of law even says that woman is like land and cannot be made impure.</p>
Buddhism	<p>Chinese traditionally regard menstrual blood as unclean and polluting and can be potent in magic and counter magic in exorcising evil spirits. It is said that Buddha enunciated five sufferings on women amongst which one is menstruation. Menstruating women cannot meditate and cannot contact with priests or take part in ceremonies such as wedding. In tibetian Buddhism, the religious tibetian women feel empowered and confident through their own menstruation. Overall menstruation is considered as a hindrance who aim to attain Buddhahood.</p>
Jainism	<p>Digambara view on menstruation suggests that menstruation renders women weak, impure mind with anxiety and hence cannot meditate peacefully. The menstruation itself causes injury to a lot of subtle organisms and puts her at disadvantage in the path of attaining moksha.</p> <p>Shwetambara's feels that female's general anatomy and menstruation with inability to practice nudity puts her in disadvantaged position in attaining moksha.</p>
Sikhism	<p>According to sacred text of Sikhism Guru Granth Sahib, Menstruation is an important activity related to childbirth and continuation of family and hence no notion of impurity is attached to it. Menstruating women have no restrictions in participating in religious or cultural events.</p>
Judaism	<p>A state of impurity Niddah when women is menstruating. Niddah lasts for 12 days, when she is bleeding and additional 7 days at the end of which she has to take ritual bath Mikveh to enter state of purity. Abstinence from physical contact, sexual intercourse, sharing bed, eating together are restrictions to be followed during Niddah. The violation of these rules renders punishment in terms of premature death.</p>
Christian	<p>According to history of Catholics, sexual intercourse was prohibited, they cannot be altar server, should live in secluded huts and not attend church services, do not touch food or have contact with men.</p>
Greece	<p>In rural Greece, historically menstrual and postpartum blood was considered powerful enough to weaken even GOD. Menstruating women cannot enter church make food, visit sick. The food which she may prepare during menstruation may become poisonous and one eat will fall sick.</p> <p>Ancient Greek medicine concluded that menstruation was vital for overall health of women. Menstruation is perceived as sacred transformative process having religious and spiritual standing.</p>
Islam	<p>In Quran, the menstruating blood is impure and unacceptable while performing religious duties. Menstruating women cannot enter mosque or shrine, may not pray or fast during Ramadan, cannot touch Quranic texts and cannot even recite its contents. Sexual intercourse is prohibited for seven days beginning from bleeding.</p>
Roman	<p>Roman Scholars Pliny the Elder and Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella have written</p>

	about impurity associated with menstruation and magical powers too. Menstruation was perceived as constant source of danger to insects, humans and plants and also had remedial usage in treating certain medical conditions. Roman medicine history suggests menstruation as normal to women and which needed to be monitored and not feared unless it failed to occur.
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The contemporary researches on menstrual practices amongst different age groups were reviewed. The summary of few of the research studies is presented here. The data was collected electronically with references.

**Table 2 : Contemporary researches on menstruation**

Sr No	Title of Paper	Authors	Journal	Variable	Methodology	Sample	Key findings
1	Restriction and Renewal, Pollution and Power, Constraint and Community: The Paradoxes of Religious Women's Experiences of Menstruation.	Dunnavant, N.C., Roberts, T.	Sex Roles 68, 121-131, 2013	Menstrual attitudes and behavior – secrecy, shame, prohibitions, community prescriptions, seclusion, embarrassment	Online survey Convenience sampling 48 item questionnaire	Sample size – 340 Age group – 17 to 62 years	Western secular women have no set codified rules than religious women
2	Silence and the history of menstruation	Pascoe Carla	Oral History association of Australian journal, no 29, 2007	Silence about menstruation	Private discussions and interview	Sample size – 123 generations	Silence surrounding menstruation has dissipated but discomfort remains
3	Socio-cultural aspects of menstruation in an urban slum in Delhi	Garg Suneela, Sharma Nandini, Sahay Ragini	India. Reproductive health matters, vol 9 (17); 2001	Socio cultural aspects of menstruation Reproductive disorders like dyspareunia, vaginal discharge, infertility and other aspects like nutrition studied	Qualitative and quantitative methods 52 in depth interview 380 group discussions	Sample size – 446 Age group -15-45 years	Menstrual practices like avoiding bathing, sexual activity, seclusion, certain food restrictions, religious rituals, use of cloth
4	Stigma of Staining ? Negotiating menstrual taboos amongst young women in Kenya.	MacLean K et al	Women's Studies International Forum. Vol 78 ; 2020	Menstrual taboos among young women Stigma of staining	Semi structured interview and focus group discussions	Sample size – 7 interviews FGD – 5 groups of 10 students Age group – 18-21 years	Absenteeism and silence during menstruation in schools, deprivation of materials, cultural stigma, gender inequality, consequences

							on health and well being of current and future generations
5	Knowledge, Practices and restrictions related to menstruation among young women from low socioeconomic community in Mumbai, India	Thakur Harshad et al	Frontiers in Public health.Vol 2 article 72; July 2014	Knowledge, practices and restrictions related to menstruation in low socioeconomic society	Qualitative and quantitative Focus Group Discussion and Key informant interviews Structured questionnaire (12)	Sample size – 192 Age group – young (15-24 yrs) Adult > 24 years	Dysmenorrhea and other problems faced by more than 70% participants. 97.6% followed religious restrictions. Unhygienic practices, unnecessary restrictions. View of boys and adult men as well as religious leaders needed to understand issues better.
6	Menstrual health in peril due to taboos and stigmas about menstruation : A comparative study in this context between two Indian villages	Chakraborty Stuti	Journal of innovative science and research technology ; Int Vol 4(7); 2014	Stigmas related to menstruation and its effect on physical health and mental health	Qualitative and quantitative methods Purposive sampling(13)	Sample size – 60 Age group – 13 to 21 years	Girls suffer from infections during periods due to poor sanitation. Do not visit gynecologist for infections or menstrual disorders. Restrictions varied from not visiting holy places to avoidance of certain food.
7	A Study on menstrual knowledge and practices among rural adolescent girls in Burdwan district, West Bengal	Maji Subhrana	Int J Adv Res; 4(9): pp 896-902 Sept 2016	To study knowledge, perception and socio cultural taboos related to menstruation	Interview through semi structured questionnaire, purposive sampling (17)	Sample size – 100 Age group 13-16	45% knowledge of menstruation, poor menstrual hygiene practices and almost all followed socio cultural restrictions

8	Menstrual knowledge and practices among adolescent females in Makurdi metropolis	Akpenpun n, Joyce Rumum, Azende Peter Msuega	Global journal of Interdisciplinary social sciences Vol 3(3); 113-1212014	Awareness of menstruation physiology, hygiene practices	Semi structured questionnaire, multi stage sampling	Sample size – 200 Age group 10-19	12.5% girls were aware that menstrual blood comes from uterus. 70.5% used sanitary napkins. Girls experienced upset and tension during first periods
9	The development of menstrual related beliefs and behaviours during adolescence in semi rural Haryana (India) :A conceptual and empirical formulation	Chopra Shruti, Sharma Krishnan	Anthropologie ; vol 49(2) : 95-1072011	Menarche experiences, cultural rituals, restrictions during menstruation . Influence of Socio economic status on menstrual practices	Cross sectional, In depth interviews	Sample size – 120 Age group – 13-18 years	68% no prepubescent knowledge of menstruation. Negative experience largely influenced by cultural beliefs. Avoidance of certain foods. Education and socio economic status not significant in beliefs related with menstruation

## DISCUSSION

The Hindu, Greeks and Romans share polyesthetic heritage and hence impurity is a common notion about menstruation found in all three cultures and civilizations. Moreover, it is to be noted that it is more considered as self purificatory process and as removal of harmful material from body. The effects of menstruation can be a guide of day to day life to be followed and not to induce any fears. All the civilizations also associate sacredness with menstruation. The science behind the practices is to be understood and decoded before rendering the practices as taboos and as a tool to hinder women empowerment.

Menstruation as impurity :

In almost all civilizations, the menstrual blood is considered as impure and that the menstruating female is in temporary period of impurity. The Sanskrit term for menstruation is *Rajasthraava* which literally means flow of 'Raja'; Raja though is a synonym of menstrual blood but also is one of the three mental properties (*Satva*, *Raja* and *Tama*). Raja denotes flow, movement, passion, energy and also denotes emotions such as anger, frustration etc. The monthly release of 'Raja' also thought as purification process, removes this excess Raja which may make women more prone to mood swings, irritability and uneasiness. Impurity is not only on physical level due to discharge of blood with vaginal secretions and mucus but also at mental levels where internal passions are at heightened levels which will hinder spiritual and religious practices. Cleanliness in body and calm mind with balance of vital force are important for performance of religious rituals. Impurity during menstruation is heightened Rajasic state of mind and body which renders certain activities inappropriate for menstruating women. Ayurveda also mentions that menstruating women will not suffer from diseases like Diabetes as toxins are removed from her body through menstruation. This process is necessary for preparation of bearing a child requires a healthy uterus.

The healing aspect of menstrual blood which was also discussed in ancient civilizations is now accepted by modern medicine as stem cells from menstrual blood are highly regenerative in nature and has potential to be used in therapies requiring stem cells. Sinu Joseph in her book *Rtu Vidya* explains that the idea of menstrual blood when referred as impure is dismissed in order to make women feel empowered and we become rigid in



its defense. Thorough investigation to understand important aspects of menstruation known to our ancestors is required to know such ideas came into being.

**Menstrual seclusion :** The isolation of menstruation is required to respect her privacy and need for rest and prevent her from infections as she is in vulnerable state. The decision of menstrual huts was made by community including women and were practiced to ensure rest. The woman who have experienced health benefits of following menstrual seclusion do wish to continue it.

**Dietary restrictions during menstruation :**

During menstruation the shedding of endometrium, which is lining of uterus breaks down and sheds. The breakdown and repair associated with overt inflammation and an influx of inflammatory cells which indicates increase in production of toxic oxygen radicals at the time of menstruation. The oxidative stress can trigger a number of potentially damaging biochemical reactions. The restricted diet with sesame seeds, jaggery, turmeric water, fruits and milk which are rich in anti oxidants help to counter oxidative stress and hence prevent damage to many systems and organs.

**Restrictions on touching menstruating women :**

The oxidative stress during menstruation results in production of positively charged atoms and hence they tend to attract electrons from those who touch them. Hence a person who touches menstruating women experiences loss of electrons putting their body at a risk of oxidative stress. Moving water produce negative ions hence bathing is a good way to regain loss of electrons by those who are impacted by coming into contact with menstruating women. Increase in positive ions in body is considered to weaken immune system and susceptible to disease. Menstruation is a state where there is naturally loss of electrons with increase in positive ions.

## CONCLUSION

The demand from society towards female as a bread earner has led to disappearance of many social restrictions during menstruation. The religious practices are strongly followed but under the fear of supernatural punishments rendering them under the name of taboos. Practices like avoiding physical activity, sexual practices, food, cooking and eating with others are thought to be myths / taboos and are disappearing with increasing education and employment. The contemporary research also highlights the fear shame and embarrassment related with menstruation where as the reason behind the increasing menstrual disorders and morbidities in women of all age group and its immense burden on medical sciences is yet to be understood. The menstrual hygiene practice and its implications on infections are more researched. The positive and negative attributes of age old menstrual practices on reproductive health is a need of current era.

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